

Easter 6 - Rogation Day 2022

Matthew 28:1-10;16-end

Father Christopher

You will see from your sheet that today is Rogation Day. How many of you know what that means, or signifies? In yesteryear today was a great festival in many places, as they beat the bounds of the parish – children would literally beat the boundaries with sticks, as the people of the parish processed all the way round the edge of the little patch of earth that was theirs, and that of their community. This served a useful purpose in reminding people which parish they were in, as well as to which parish they owed loyalty, and, I suppose, for legal purposes, such as knowing which manorial courts you were subject to.

The real meaning of Rogation however is 'to ask', from the Latin *rogare*, and it signified a day, or time, of fasting and prayer for the newly sown seeds, that they would in due time grow to the fulness of whichever crop they were to destined to be, come harvest time, hence the harvest music we've had this morning, there not being a wide variety of well-known Rogation hymns!

I'm not quite clear how the beating of the bounds related to this, but I'm guessing that the marking of the boundaries of the parish signified the earth which was being prayed for: the precise patch from which fecundity was hoped for. It is rather appropriate that we are celebrating our outreach today, and commissioning our new outreach group, particularly in relation to our work within this parish, hoping and praying that it will bear fruit.

Though we are also taught that our neighbour is anyone in need, and our work, and our concern, is not just for those within our own parish, or indeed country.

It is also fitting that we have the readings we are given today, as we move from Jesus's last resurrection appearances towards His Ascension and Pentecost. Neither of those events features in Matthew's gospel, from which we heard this morning, but Jesus does seek to prepare His disciples for what lies ahead, for a time without His bodily presence with them, though he ends by telling them, '*lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.*' It is left for Luke and John to describe His Spirit being given to guide the disciples, and indeed the Church, though Matthew does give the strongest expression of what would become known later as the Trinity, as Jesus commissions them to baptise in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

His Great Commission, as it has become known, raises the question of precisely how we are to sow seeds, and also of what *fruit* we are to hope for. '*Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you.*' This has been used to *narrow* the focus of the Church's mission by some: to say that the only things Jesus *actually* tells us to do directly is to tell people to follow his commands, and to baptise.

What would the likely fruit be however, of those things as meant in that sense, in isolation?

If we were to go into the High Street here, or indeed to go round our parish boundaries, cutting up the boundary as it bisects Kensington Gardens, telling people to observe Jesus's commandments, and shoving them in the Round Pond to baptise them, with the formula we use here in church, whether they liked it or not, I somehow suspect the faith in this parish might not exactly flourish as a result.

No, all seeds need good soil, and the seeds of the faith only grow when people believe that we love them for their own sake, rather than for the sake of adding another soul to our 'job done' list.

I have certainly been on the receiving end of the glassy eyed and cold glinting smile of one who wants to save me, without seeming to want to know me at all. And it is altogether different from the look of full attention from someone really seeking to know me - to value me for who I am.

Indeed, the kind of look which, though not described, I feel shines out of all descriptions of Jesus's one-to-one encounters, particularly His healing miracles. The look indeed of a Father and a brother; of one who has created each of us in our mother's womb, and yet is one with us. And yet, while that may be what we want to hear and believe, how does it fit with that straightforward instruction of Jesus, His last instruction to His disciples in Luke's gospel?

You Fr Christopher, in your soft liberal ways, might think loving others must come first, but Jesus simply says to teach all nations to follow His commands and to baptise them. Well, yes. But what do the words '*observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you*' actually mean?

When asked what the greatest commandment was, obviously referring to the Jewish law, Jesus said, '*Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself.*' And we know of course who our neighbour is, because when Jesus is asked that follow-up question, He tells the parable of the Good Samaritan. Our neighbour is anyone who is in need, whoever they are, however different from ourselves, whether they are part of our community or not – an interesting point when considering the nature of our parish, and the beating of the bounds. And '*whatsoever I have commanded you*' does not I think relate simply to the words Jesus has taught. More than that, rabbi though He is, it is in Jesus's actions, in His healing, in His attention to others - to the outcast as much as, or even more than, the insider - in His loving, in His breaking of bread, in which He commands us to follow His example. In His sharing of His very self.

Jesus's words are not tablets of stone for us to follow by the letter – rather He embodies the Law, and it is the person of Jesus whom we follow. And it is in reaching out to those around us here, through the Dalgarno Food Bank, through Glass Door, through time spent with people in church here during the day seeking solace, through our work with refugees from Afghanistan and Ukraine, through our work with the lonely and housebound, through our work with the homeless – those who may *not* otherwise have a parish to call their own, that we seek to follow the Jesus who is at the centre of our lives. If you don't get all of that from the Great Commission, remember that Jesus says to '*teach all nations*'. That didn't mean global mission in the way we might understand it now – it did include the known world as it was then, but the words used for nations, *ethnē*, really means Gentiles in this context, i.e. those *beyond* the Jews - beyond our own people, those outside. Again, an interesting counterpoint or touchstone for our idea of the parish, and its boundaries.

But how are we to fulfil these commands, whose scope is seemingly endless? Well, that is the easy part. Because we do not do any of this in our own strength, but in the strength of God. '*Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.*' And more fool you if you try – everything we are and do must flow from the person of Jesus. Otherwise we would simply be rather sub-standard social workers, without their training and resources.

The Great Commission follows, and must necessarily follow, and flow out of, our worship, as indeed must everything in our lives. '*Come, see the place where the Lord lay.*' And when they face Jesus, the two Marys '*came and held him by the feet, and worshipped him.*' An intriguing contrast with John's gospel, where Mary Magdalene is told not to hold onto Him.

Just as the disciples, '*when they saw him, they worshipped.*' Some may have doubted too, but all is held by Jesus in our worship of Him, knowing that He holds all that we are, and enables us to hold others.

What we come here to church for is not just for us to treasure in our hearts for our own comfort, for then it will not sprout seeds; then our faith is planted in shallow soil. But rather, our faith is planted in us to bear fruit.

Now let us follow Jesus's example, as He commanded us to, and go out to those in need, to love them for who they are as children of God; and to show that love for them in this place. For that love is planted in us by the one who made us, and if we will only allow Him to, God will give the growth.

Amen